

NBC NIGHTLY NEWS
19 December 1984

NP01|SPACE SHUTTLE|BROKAW: Good evening, I'm Tom Brokaw with NBC Nightly News. The Air Force is scheduled to launch a military satellite late next month, and the Pentagon has been working very hard to keep details of that mission a mystery, threatening to investigate even speculation about it. Tonight, there is a good deal less mystery and even more controversy. The Washington Post published a story on the launch today, and stories from other news agencies followed. The administration is furious. At NBC News, we withheld an earlier story on the launch and the satellite at the direct request of Defense Secretary Weinberger. But tonight, Fred Francis describes what has been reported about this mission so far.

FRANCIS: The reports say Discovery will launch the world's most sophisticated spy satellite, which will stay in orbit over the Soviet Union and intercept all Soviet space and missile communications. The Defense Department contends that the technology is sensitive and any mention of the satellite's capabilities is a breach of national security. Currently, the United States can eavesdrop on most but not all Soviet communications through a network of dozens of smaller *Ferret satellites. But this new one is, according to one military expert, light-years ahead of anything we or the Russians now have in space. It has two large antennas: one, which is described as an intelligence vacuum cleaner, gathering all information; the other to transmit the Soviet communications back to Earth. William Arkin, a military analyst, says it is a new generation of satellite. WILLIAM ARKIN (military analyst, Institute for Policy Studies): The receivers and some of the components of the satellite have been fully tested aboard aircraft platforms and other experimental platforms, but this will be the first operational launching of a large, multipurpose communications-intelligence satellite.

FRANCIS: In addition to collecting all Soviet spaceflight and missile data, the new satellite will be able to listen in on Soviet radio and telephone transmissions. The Defense Department maintains that premature disclosure of the satellite's abilities will give the Soviets time to design countermeasures. But that will be more difficult with this new satellite, according to one expert, who says the Soviets can easily track the 40 United States satellites now in use, but this one, he said, will be more difficult to locate. NBC News has additional details about the new technology in this satellite, details, which, if released, could possibly affect national security. Because of that we've chosen not to report them. Fred Francis, NBC News, Washington.